Happy birthday, Schuylkill County! One hundred sixty-five years ago today, March 1, 1811, a new county was formed in Pennsylvania from parts of Berks and Northampton. They called it Schuylkill, after the river whose headquarters are formed from the springs in its mountains. “Schuylkill” is the Dutch term for “hidden stream.”

Seven years later, on March 3, 1818, the county was enlarged with the addition of parts of Columbia (Ringtowner Valley region) and Luzerne (Allentown Township, McAdoo region); its current size of 484 square miles, stretching 30 miles from east to west, and 24½ miles north to south. These boundaries held fast through repeated efforts to take away the northeast corner and make it, along with lower Luzerne, a new county named Quay, after a well-known U.S. Senator of that era. The Quay County proposal was defeated several times in the state legislature before its supporters gave up.

Schuylkill’s first county seat was Orwigsburg, then the hub of the county’s sparse population. The first session of court was held at an Orwigsburg tavern owned by Abraham Reiffsschneider, and the first court house was erected in 1815 at a cost of $5,000. It was a two-story brick structure with court room on the ground floor, offices and jury room upstairs.

As the development of coal deposits started to lure people northward along the Schuylkill River, Pottsville became a boom town—some say the first industrial boom town in the nation—and the county seat was moved there on December 1, 1811. Pottsville was incorporated on February 19, 1820, named after the pioneer John Pott family. The original Pottsville courthouse was erected on a lot purchased from the George Farquhar estate between Second and Third streets. The two-story structure cost $30,000 and had a 623-pound bell and town clock. As the county continued to expand northward over the Blue Mountain into the Mahanoy Valley, the need for a larger courthouse resulted in erection of the present building, costing $400,000, which was dedicated September 3, 1891. It is built of Cleveland limestone along Romanesque architectural lines. The annex on the west side cost $321,000 and was dedicated March 11, 1934.

At the time of its first official U.S. Census in 1820, Schuylkill was credited with 11,339 inhabitants. Succeeding census counts were: 1830, 20,744; 1840, 29,053; 1850-60, 7135; 1870, 116,428; 1880, 172,927; 1890, 173,027; 1900, 207,894; 1910, 228,331; 1920, 228,417; 1930, 191,005; 1940, 173,027; 1950, 207,894; 1960, 173,027; 1970, 160,080; 1980, 134,333; 1990, 128,417; 2000, 128,417; 2010, 128,417; 2020, 128,417.

The postal card view of the county seat above is from the historical collection of Lorraine Stanton, authority of “Old Frackville Tales,” who also compiled the data for the article below.

Schuylkill 165 years old today